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# Jeff Cooper: The Most Influential Marine You've Never Heard Of

By Barrett Tillman

*Author's note: If you don't know who Jeff Cooper is, here's the short version: He is probably the most influential Marine you've never heard of.*

*Born John Dean Cooper, Jeff was much more than a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve. For those of us who grew up shooting in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, there were three genuinely influential writers: large-caliber revolver innovator Elmer Keith; English professor and rifleman Jack O'Connor; and Jeff Cooper. O'Connor died in 1978, "Uncle Elmer" left the range in 1984 and Cooper died in 2006 but was still writing weeks before his death.*

*A few days after Jeff died, I lunched with an old friend. We had seen firsthand the profound extent of Cooper's influence: as a writer, instructor, innovator and personality.*

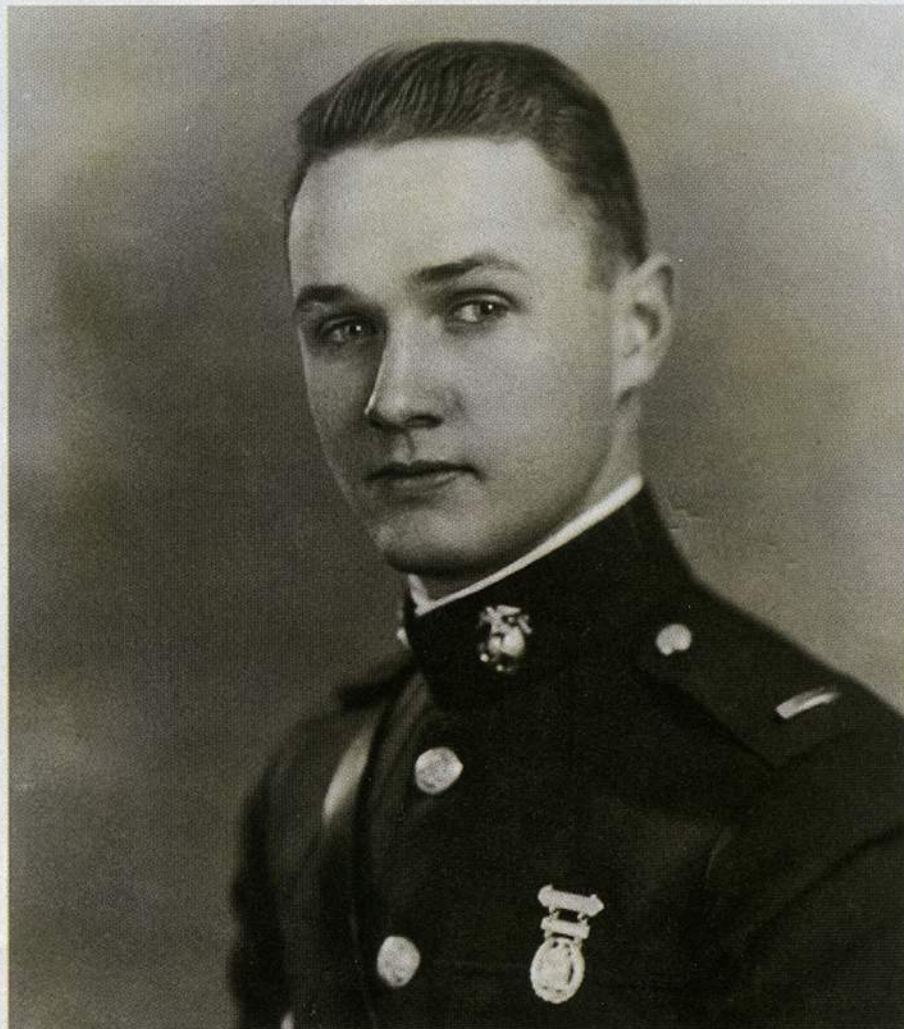
*My friend, an accomplished gunsmith, made an insightful point: Cooper exerted tremendous economic as well as tactical influence. While he didn't invent practical pistol competition, he shaped and then refined it. In doing so, he heavily influenced the M1911 industry that affects not only gunsmiths but reloaders, leather/holster makers, instructors and the continuing deluge of 1911 clones. Look in any gun store display case: Colt, Kimber, Para Ordnance, Night-hawk, Smith & Wesson and Sig Sauer; among others. Even without counting the custom shops, you're seeing Cooper's legacy.*

*That got me thinking: What are the odds that somebody else will match Cooper as an influence across such a spectrum?*

*Likely 0.00.*

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**B**orn to privilege in a Los Angeles, Calif., realty family in 1920, John Dean "Jeff" Cooper was an avid reader and traveled and hunted extensively. Traveling with his parents in 1930, 10-year-old Jeff enjoyed Scandinavia but came away from Russia with a lifetime aversion. His lingering impression was one of pervasive fear amid socialist squalor. Another influence on the young man was Spain in 1936, shortly before the nation's civil war. The



**Jeff Cooper was a WW II combat veteran, instructor and author who revolutionized the world of practical shooting.**

travelers had read Hemingway's 1932 "Death in the Afternoon" and became bullfighting aficionados.

Cooper finished high school as commander of the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps battalion and prepared for Stanford University. He had no particular interest in the school, but his father willed it, so he went. He maintained an A average, fenced and again excelled in ROTC. Upon graduation in 1941 with a political science degree, Cooper was commissioned a Marine second lieutenant and was at The Basic School at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. He hastened back to California and married Jane Ellen "Janelle" Marks, whom he had known in high school.

## To War

In May 1942, Cooper reported aboard the 26-year-old battleship USS *Pennsylvania* (BB-38), which had survived Pearl Harbor. He became a seagoing leatherneck in the ship's Marine detachment. He saw combat where "the Pennsy" unlimbered her 14-inch guns in the Aleutians, Marshalls and Marianas.

Not content with shipboard duties, Cooper often went ashore to exercise his marksmanship skills. Twice he had occasion to use his sidearm. He took a Colt .45 single-action revolver to war, having read a prominent gun writer's opinion that the heavy round would perform well in the jungle. On Kwajalein in February 1944, he commanded a detail that encountered a lone Japanese

COURTESY OF COOPER LEGACY FOUNDATION AND FMG PUBLICATIONS

Decades after Jeff Cooper refined the “Modern Technique,” his influence persists as MCAS Miramar’s Special Reaction Team hones its skills in 2019. These Marines utilize the principles Cooper championed to achieve the holy trinity of combat shooting: accuracy, power and speed.

rifleman. Before the enemy soldier realized his peril, Cooper drew his six-shooter and killed the man.

About four months later, on Saipan, he led a patrol seeking the flank of a battalion the ship was supporting. Climbing a tree trunk for a better view, he noticed several helmets below and to his right—Japanese helmets. One of the enemy saw the American at the same time, raising an Arisaka rifle. Cooper drew his M1911 and, using the sights “at fairly close range,” got a center hit. He later said he had the impression of a rifle spinning in mid-air before scampering down the trunk.

Upon promotion to captain, Cooper commanded the Marine detachment. His relief caught up with him at Efate in the New Hebrides southeast of the Solomons. By the time he left in late 1944, he had been aboard for 30 months with six battle stars on his Pacific campaign ribbon.

Following an all-too-brief reunion with Janelle and baby Christy, Cooper returned to work. At war’s end, he was a newly minted major on the staff of III



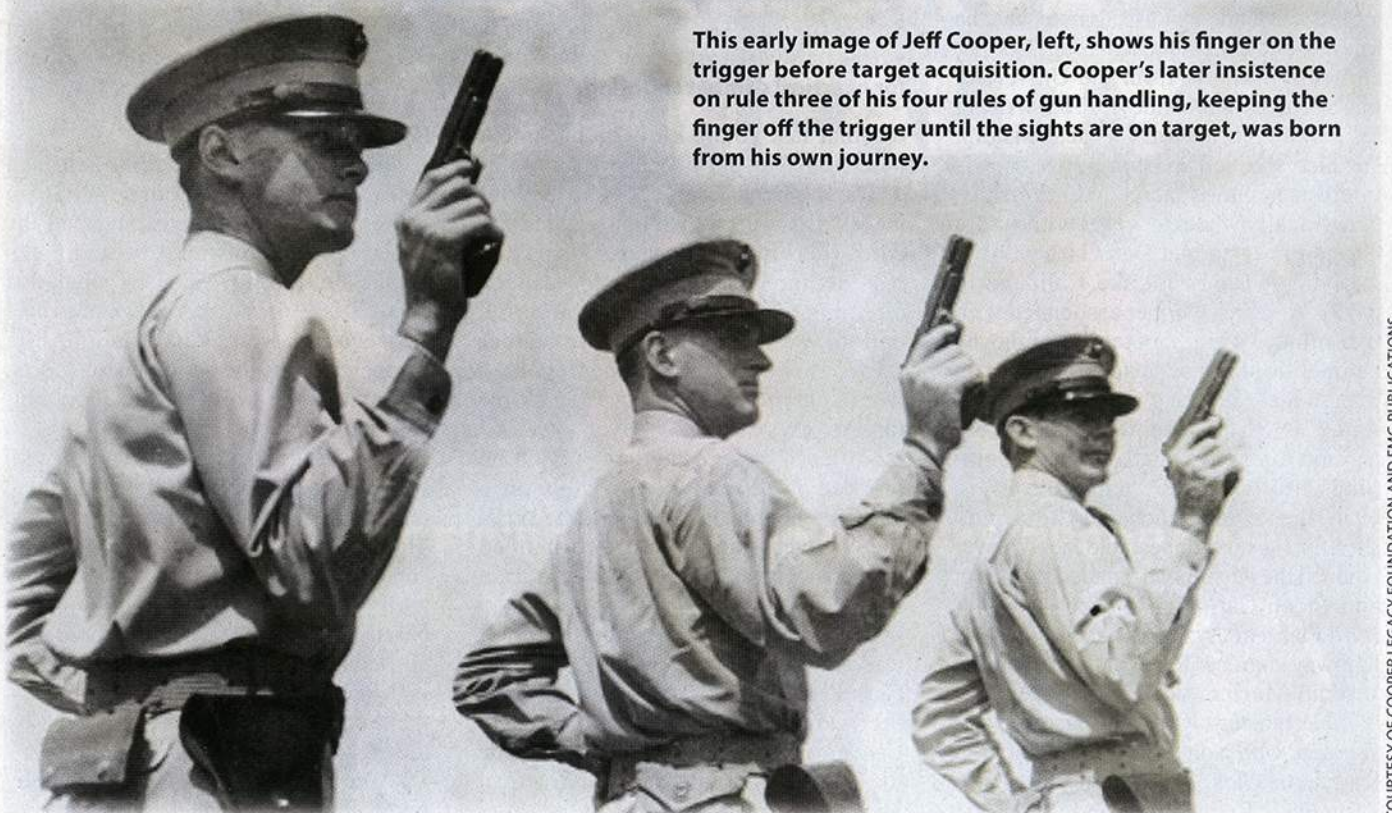
SGT BECKY CLEVELAND, USMC

Amphibious Corps planning for Operation Olympic, the would-be invasion of Kyushu in November 1945. He later recalled that after daily tasks with routes, shipping and supplies, talk turned to the conquest of Japan. “We knew from Saipan and Okinawa that most of their civilians would fight to the death, so we asked ourselves, ‘How do you kill 70 million people?’ ”

In his career, Cooper rubbed elbows with stellar talent. He passed Captain Robert Cushman, who rolled out of *Pennsylvania* as he reported aboard in 1942; shared a hospital ward with

then-Lieutenant Colonel Lew Walt in 1945 and taught amphibious doctrine at Quantico. Among those who attended his Gallipoli lecture was then-Brigadier General Victor Krulak who recalled: “Jeff was an unusual instructor in that he was extremely penetrating. He did not accept an idea at face value. He went after the facts ... he was a good speaker who always had his work done ... Jeff was not an ordinary man, nor an ordinary Marine. He was acknowledged as about as intense as any Marine could be ... He was serious about his profession.”

In 1949, after instructing intelligence



This early image of Jeff Cooper, left, shows his finger on the trigger before target acquisition. Cooper’s later insistence on rule three of his four rules of gun handling, keeping the finger off the trigger until the sights are on target, was born from his own journey.

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and history at Quantico, Cooper described himself as “an unemployed battalion commander,” and left the Corps as a major in November. Subsequently he conducted both covert and deniable operations, mainly in Asia. Not even his family knew operational details of his clandestine service. He said that he was sworn to secrecy, and he took that pledge to the grave.

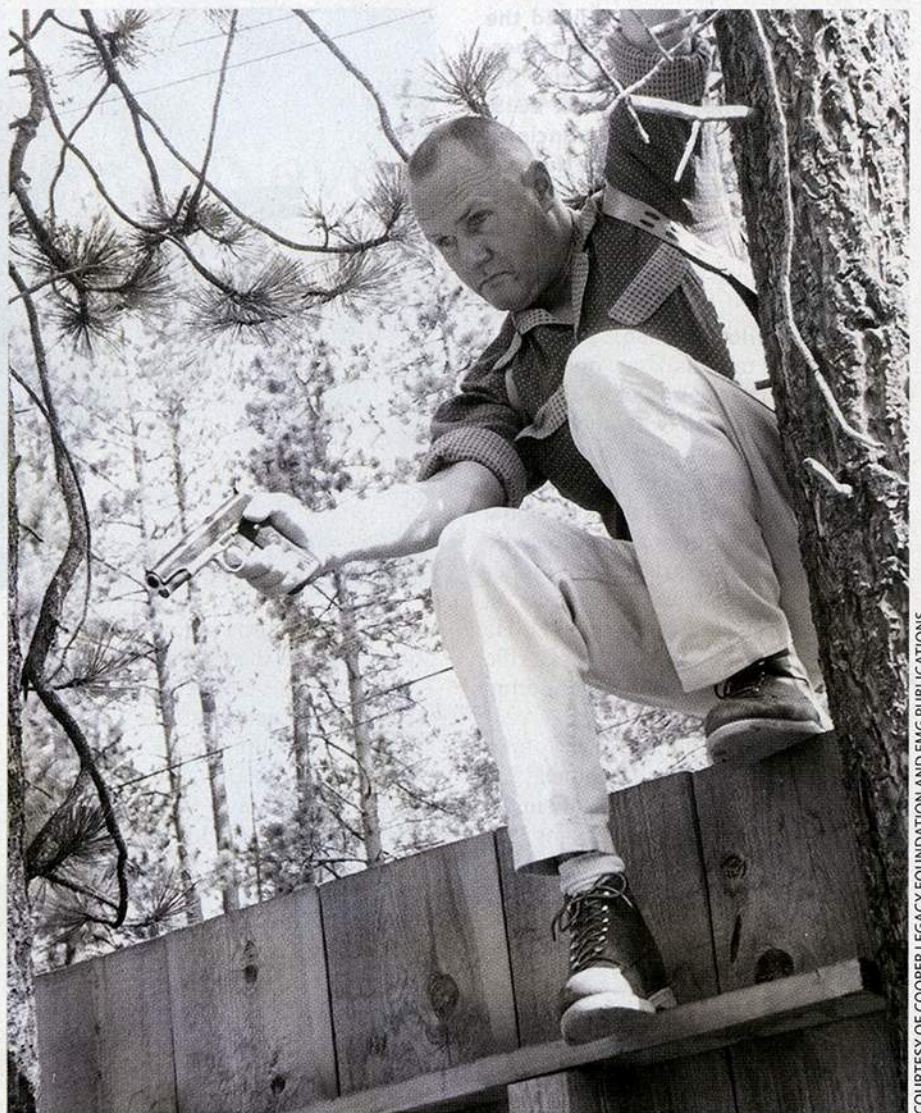
However, occasionally he related incidental events. Driving with a Thai constable through drug country, Cooper’s car was confronted by “a nondescript looking [man]” with a British STEN gun about 25 yards distant. The bandit opened fire, putting three 9 mm rounds into the car, one narrowly missing Cooper. While the gunman attempted to reload, from a seated position Cooper straight-armed his 1911, got a quick sight picture, and pressed the trigger once. Center hit, fight ended.

In another episode, he needed to get upcountry immediately and asked a colleague for help. Cooper had requested “a fast airplane” and his friend took him literally. Screeching to a stop on a flight line, the driver proudly presented a Thai Air Force F8F Bearcat in the chocks, propeller turning over. Cooper appreciated his friend’s efficiency and sentiment but settled for a ride in a Douglas B-26 Invader.

### Postwar

As a lifelong hunter and a combat Marine officer, by the 1950s he was locked and loaded to disseminate what he knew—and continued learning. Cooper earned a master’s from the University of California-Riverside in 1968, writing his required theses on American history. He also thrived on competition. His interests included racing in his Porsche, occasionally wheel to wheel with future Grand Prix standout Dan Gurney.

Living in Big Bear Lake, Calif., north of Los Angeles, Cooper associated with like-minded pistol shooters who enjoyed competition, either head-to-head or in open matches. Along the way, he gravitated toward those who shared his passion for improving the brand. Beginning with Big Bear “leather slaps” in 1956, the shooters included two deputy sheriffs: the near-unbeatable Jack Weaver who led the way in two-handed shooting, and Elden Carl. Grade school teacher John Plahn analyzed the discipline, and highway engineer Ray Chapman, another veteran Marine, was among the early combat masters. Combat masters were shooters who won a specified number of league matches. Later, high school student Thell Reed began shooting—the



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**Before Gunsite, Cooper’s home in Big Bear, Calif., served as the original live-fire site where he stress-tested the techniques that would eventually become the standard for practical combat shooting.**

original fast young kid who became a combat master as a teenager.

The Big Bear events proved a live-fire laboratory, a petri dish that yielded the cure to generations. Because Cooper had won his three gunfights single-handed (clinging to that tree offered no other option), he began that way in leather slaps. However, as matches evolved from single-round fast draws to multiple targets, exposure to Weaver and Carl modified Cooper’s method, which he distilled into the “Modern Technique”: a large-caliber pistol (preferably the 1911); the Weaver stance with two-handed isometric pressure on the grip, the flash sight picture and surprise trigger break.

The holy trinity of combat shooting was accuracy, power and speed. Cooper consulted a Catholic priest who translated the mantra into *Diligentia*, *Vis*, and *Celeritas*, shortened to DVC. It became the motto for the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC).

### IPSC and Gunsite

The 1970s were the defining decade of Cooper’s life. He cofounded IPSC in 1976, the same year he established the American Pistol Institute, better known as Gunsite, near tiny Paulden (population about 2,000) in northern Arizona. The two entities were joined at the hip: Cooper gave us the action pistol sports, then taught the world how to shoot big-bore handguns fast and accurately.

IPSC designed humanoid targets with scoring zones maximized for center hits, reducing values toward the peripheries. Maximum points were obtained with “major power factor” handgun cartridges while “minor power factor” (defined based on bullet momentum) scored proportionately less outside the center zones. In deference to some national sensibilities, the human target was later replaced by the eight-sided “amoeba.”

A shooter’s score was determined by points on the target against time in sec-

onds. Essentially, the score represented points per second. Normally each target required two hits, recognizing that single handgun rounds would not reliably end a fight unless “above the eyebrows.”

With IPSC, Cooper raised practical pistol competition to international recognition. The first world practical pistol champion was Ray Chapman of Big Bear fame, winning the title in Switzerland. Subsequent world matches have been held in the United States, Africa, Central America, Europe and Pacific nations.

IPSC evolved quickly, expanding into rifle and combat shotgun competition, leading to dedicated three-gun matches. Another Arizonan, Rob Leatham, became a perennial national champion with eight world titles, and instructed military clients.

When Cooper founded Gunsite, he was well established with the shooting public. He wrote a monthly column in *Guns & Ammo* magazine from launch in 1958 to 2003, plus influential books such as “Cooper on Handguns” in 1974.

The first Gunsite plat was less than 200 acres at the end of a rocky road, since expanded to about 3,000 with 20 ranges. Original facilities included a small office, a classroom and restrooms. Indoor and outdoor tactical simulators included the



**Aboard USS America (LHA-6), a Force Recon Marine prepares his M1911 for a deck shoot. Cooper's wartime service as a seagoing Marine began on USS Pennsylvania (BB-38).**

original “fun house” where students learned live-fire interior tactics with hostile and no-shoot targets. As finances permitted, Cooper and his wife purchased additional property as a buffer zone for increasingly popular rifle classes.

As “Brute” Krulak had noted years earlier, Cooper possessed a command presence. His stout, 6-foot-2-inch frame, gunmetal gray eyes and deceptively soft voice imparted authority and confidence. Some considered Cooper's 's instructive demeanor overbearing, even arrogant.

But for those who dissented from his teaching, he often said, “Let him get in a couple of gunfights and report back to us.”

Cooper had no thought of teaching every class, although for years, he conducted portions of each, with range coaching and classroom lessons. He assembled a cadre of instructors, preferring those who had “shot for record” to enhance credibility. But mainly he wanted not just excellent shooters but devoted teachers—not everyone who masters a skill can transmit it.

The growing staff was heavy with police and military, with Marines well represented. An early operations manager was son-in-law Joe Wisdom, a former captain, plus instructor Bill Jeans who later established Morrigan Consulting, and notably Clint Smith of Thunder Ranch. Today half the instructors are veteran Marines.

Cooper taught “close-range interpersonal crisis management.” Much later, instructors described a defensive handgun as “the original point-and-click interface.” In training, Jeff advocated failure drills in which two center of mass hits did not end the fight. Thus, he developed the Mozambique drill based on a colleague's experience in that distressed

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LCPL CARLOS DANIEL CHAVEZ-FLORES, USMC

**The points-per-second scoring system employed during IPSC competitive marksmanship events were implemented by some Marine Corps commands.**

nation. When the first two rounds had little effect, the African shooter placed the third “between the lights.”

As originally taught at Gunsite, the drill called for a short assessment before firing the third round. An attorney client influenced Cooper’s thinking by asking, “Why wait? Why not go to the head right away?” In a rare instance, Cooper accepted the advice of a student.

Another failure drill addressed mechanical malfunction. When a weapon failed to fire, the immediate remedy was to tap the magazine to seat it, rack the action to cock the hammer and ensure a live round is chambered, and fire as necessary. Jeff had learned the process when shooting Browning Automatic Rifles and transferred it to pistols.

Gunsite advocated a stream of doctrinal mantras, including the now universal four rules of gun handling:

1. Safety. “All guns are loaded.” (Even when they’re not. Especially when they’re “not.”)

2. Muzzle awareness. “Don’t point a weapon at anything you’re unwilling to destroy.”

3. Finger placement. “Don’t put your finger on the trigger until your sights are on target and you’re ready to fire.”

4. Identification. “Be certain of your target.” Other outlets added the cautionary, “and the background.”

The basic pistol class, API 250, ran five days plus Saturdays devoted to a shoot-off and graduation. The essence of the course was contained in Cooper’s Wednesday

afternoon lecture of the combat mindset. Graduates who defended themselves were near unanimous: Gunsite’s psychological preparation was the most valuable part of the course.

In dozens of interviews with people who somehow survived violent assaults, Cooper found the dominant reaction was “Not fear, not agony, not despair, but surprise. This can’t be happening to *me!* I’m special!” Contrarily, trained personnel think: “I knew this could happen, and I’m prepared for it.” Thus, the Gunsite color code of awareness:

Condition White: Asleep while awake. Totally unaware.

Condition Yellow: A relaxed awareness of one’s surroundings.

Condition Orange: Focus upon a potential threat.

Condition Red: Fight.

In accepting that bad things occasionally happen to decent people, Gunsite grads frequently averted the need to shoot because they dominated the threat.

Communications millionaire and NRA board member Owen “Buz” Mills bought the business in 1999, later known as Gunsite Training Center and now Gunsite Academy.

Between 2021 and 2024 the Corps revamped its marksmanship training by moving away from the competition culture of shooting jackets and bull’s-eyes to field kit and combat-oriented positions without sitting for rifles. Some commands experimented with “points over time” which duplicated IPSC scoring.

Cooper’s abiding love was the rifle. In the 1970s, he conceived the concept of the scout rifle, a bolt-action carbine with long-eye-relief scope for fast sight acquisition and good peripheral vision. He preferred a .308 Winchester as a general-purpose cartridge, fired from an 18-inch barrel, effective for most shooters to 300 yards. When queried about the relatively short barrel, Cooper noted that often the harmonics in shorter tubes were less disruptive than in standard-length barrels, thus reducing group dispersion. Though originally based on the Remington 600, the scout rifle concept took hold with factory models from Ruger, Steyr and others.

It’s instructive that among his lesser accomplishments, Cooper was an NRA director for 21 years. As an eloquent advocate of gun rights, he had few peers.

From his decades of writing and instructing, Cooper personally or collaboratively brought about not only the practical pistol revolution but set a standard for everyone now engaged in firearms training.

### A Personal View

Cooper left the line in September 2006, age 86.

Though Cooper’s physical decline shocked those who had known him for decades, he retained his perceptivity as well as his enthusiasm almost until the end. His last book, a history and personal anthology titled “Shotluck,” was released by his daughter Lindy Wisdom in 2006. Meanwhile, his personal newsletter, *Gunsite Gossip*, went through multiple editions.

There’s probably no room for anyone else to do what Cooper did with firearms. It seems doubtful that anyone will be able to exert a Cooper-ian influence upon the development and/or use of the “blaster,” or whatever new technological weapon is created. The Earth has spun too many times for one person to retain that much sway in an increasingly corporatized industry and globalized world.

He was, and remains, irreplaceable.

*Executive Editor’s note: The incidents in the story were told by Cooper in class and in his various books, the most relevant being “To Ride, Shoot Straight, and Speak the Truth.”*

*Author’s bio: Barrett Tillman is a professional author with more than 40 books and 800 articles published worldwide. A lifelong marksman, he cofounded Oregon IPSC and led a national championship team of the Single-Action Shooting Society.* 🐾